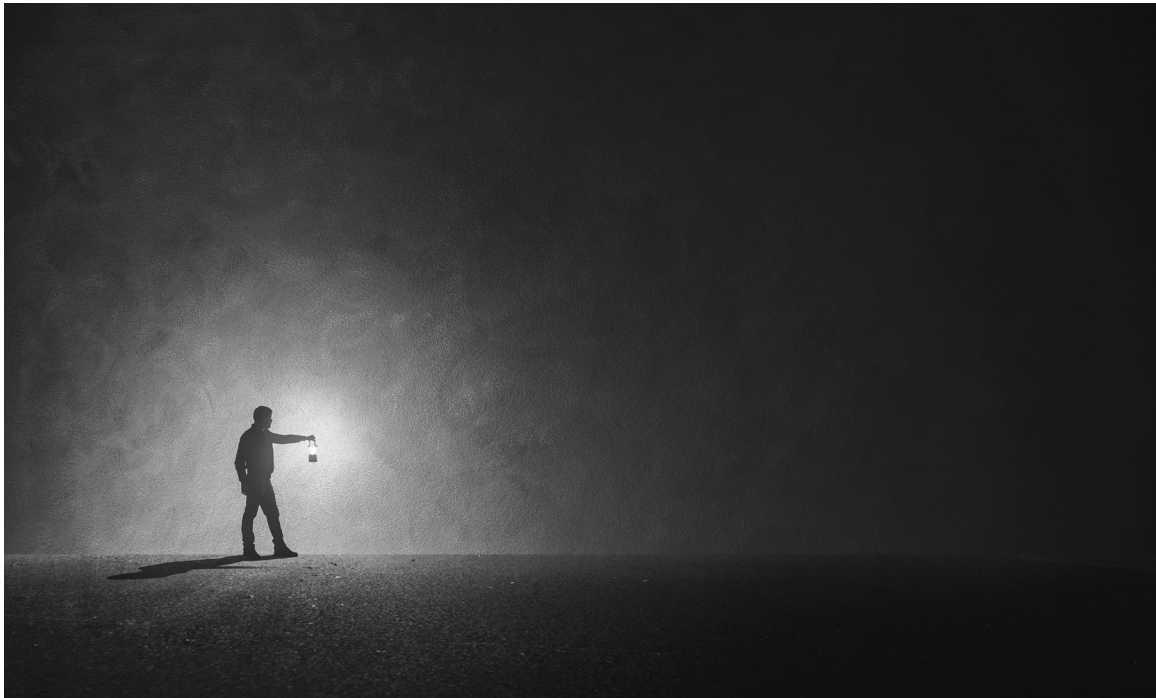


1.

Va'era

How Big Questions Bring Us Closer to G-d

Reframing doubt as a pathway to spiritual growth



Dedicated to Michael and Fiona Scharf, in appreciation for their friendship and partnership with JLI and their dedication to bringing the light of Torah to communities across the globe

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Va'era

G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the “four expressions of redemption,” He promises to take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai; He will then bring them to the Land He promised to the patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, “Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness.” Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron’s staff turns into a snake

and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians.

The waters of the Nile turn to blood, swarms of frogs overrun the land, and lice infest all humans and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities, a pestilence kills the domestic animals, and painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating hail. Still, “the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses.”

INTRODUCTION

Rashi Rules:

1. Rashi is not an anthology of Midrash. When he quotes a Midrash, it's only to answer a problem in *peshat*.
2. Rashi usually quotes from a source verbatim. Deviation is intentional. It means he is trying to say something slightly, but significantly, different.

Question for Discussion:

Think about a question or problem you have with the Torah or Judaism. How does it affect your attitude toward that particular verse in the Torah or aspect of Judaism?

I. “I APPEARED TO THE PATRIARCHS”

G-d’s Opening Words to Moses

TEXT 1

EXODUS 6:2-8

ב. וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹקִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה'.

ג. וְאַרְא אֶל אַבְרָהָם אֶל יִצְחָק וְאֶל יַעֲקֹב בְּקֹל שְׁדֵי-י וְשְׁמִי ה' לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם.

ד. וְגַם הִקְמֹתִי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם לָתֵת לָהֶם אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר גָּרוּ בָּהּ.

ה. וְגַם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת נַאֲקוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם מַעֲבִידִם אֹתָם וְאֶזְכֹּר אֶת בְּרִיתִי.

ו. לָכֵן אֹמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה' וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֹתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֹתְכֶם מֵעַבְדֹתָם וְגִאֲלֹתִי אֹתְכֶם בְּזֵרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים.

ז. וְלִקְחֹתִי אֹתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהִיִּיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹקִים וַיִּדְעֻתֶם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֹתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלוֹת מִצְרַיִם.

ח. וְהִבֵּאתִי אֹתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יָדִי לָתֵת אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב וְנִתַּתִּי אֹתָהּ לָכֶם מִיּוֹרְשָׁה אֲנִי ה'.

2. And G-d spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am G-d.
3. “And I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the name of ‘*Kel Shakai*,’ but by My name *Havayah* I was not known to them.
4. “I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners.
5. “And also I have heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant.

6. “Therefore, say to the Israelite people: I am G-d; I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary judgments.

7. “And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your G-d. And you shall know that I, the L-rd, am your G-d who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.

8. “I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for an inheritance; I am G-d.”

Rashi’s First Explanation

TEXT 2A

RASHI, EXODUS 6:3

”וַאֲרָא” . אֵל הָאֲבוֹת.

”בְּקֵל שֵׁד-י” . הַבְּטָחָתִים הַבְּטָחוֹת וּבְכֵן אָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֲנִי קֵל שֵׁד-י .

”וְשָׁמִי ה’ לֹא נִוְדַעְתִּי לָהֶם” . . . לֹא נִכְרַתִּי לָהֶם בְּמִדַּת אֲמִתּוֹת שְׁלִי ,

שֶׁעָלֶיהָ נִקְרָא שְׁמִי ה’ , נֶאֱמָן לְאֲמִת דְּבָרִי , שֶׁהֲרִי הַבְּטָחָתִים וְלֹא קִיַּמְתִּי .

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi)

1040–1105

Most noted biblical and Talmudic commentator. Born in Troyes, France, Rashi studied in the famed *yeshivot* of Mainz and Worms. His commentaries on the Pentateuch and the Talmud, which focus on the straightforward meaning of the text, appear in virtually every edition of the Talmud and Bible.

“And I appeared.” To the patriarchs.

“By the name of *Kel Shakai*.” I made certain promises to them, and in the case of all of these I said unto them, “I am *Kel Shakai*.”

“But by my name *Havayah* I was not known to them.” . . . I was not recognized by them in My attribute of “keeping faith,” because of which My name is called “*Havayah*.” This particular name denotes that I am certain to substantiate My promise. Indeed, I made promises to them, but did not fulfill them during their lifetime.

TEXT 2B

RASHI, IBID.

"לְכֹן." עַל פִּי אוֹתָהּ הַשְּׁבוּעָה.
 "אָמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה'." הַנֶּאֱמָן בְּהַבְטָחָתִי.
 "וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם." כִּי כֵן הַבְטַחְתִּי, "וְאַחֲרַי כֵּן יֵצְאוּ בְרִכְשׁ גָּדוֹל".

"Therefore." I.e., in accordance with that promise.

"Say to the Israelite people: I am G-d." Who is faithful in My promise.

"I will free you." For so did I promise them, "and afterward shall they go out with great substance" (Genesis 15:14).

Rashi's Second Explanation: Introduction or Response

TEXT 3

EXODUS 5:22-23

כב. וַיָּשׁוּב מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי לָמָּה הִרְעִיתָהּ לָעָם הַזֶּה לָמָּה
 זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי.
 כג. וּמֵאִזּ בָּאתִי אֶל פַּרְעֹה לְדַבֵּר בְּשִׁמְךָ הִרַע לָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִצַּל לֹא הִצַּלְתָּ
 אֶת עַמְּךָ.

22. And Moses returned to G-d, and said, "G-d, why have You brought harm to this people? Why have You sent me?"

23. "From the moment I have come to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, and You have not saved Your people."

TEXT 4

RASHI, EXODUS 6:9

וּרְבוּתֵינוּ דְרִשְׁוּהוּ לְעִנְיָן שֶׁל מַעֲלָה, שֶׁאָמַר מֹשֶׁה לָמָּה הִרְעַנְתָּהּ,
אָמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא "חֲבַל עַל דָּאֲבָדִין וְלֹא מִשְׁתַּפְּחִין" - יֵשׁ לִי
לְהִתְאוּנוֹן עַל מִיתַת הָאֲבוֹת, הִרְבֵּה פְעָמִים נִגְלִיתִי אֲלֵיהֶם בְּקַל שֵׁד-י
וְלֹא אָמְרוּ לִי מָה שְׂמָה, וְאַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ "מָה שְׂמוֹ מָה אָמַר אֲלֵיהֶם".
"וְגַם הִקְמֹתִי וְגו'". וְכִשְׁבַּקְשׁ אֲבָרָהֶם לְקַבֵּר אֶת שְׂרָה לֹא מָצָא קֶבֶר עַד
שֶׁקָּנָה בְּדַמִּים מְרַבִּים. וְכֵן בִּיצְחָק עֲרַעְרוּ עָלָיו עַל הַבְּאֵרוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָפַר.
וְכֵן יַעֲקֹב וַיִּקֶן אֶת חֶלְקֵת הַשְּׂדֵה, לְנִטּוֹת אֶהְלוֹ, וְלֹא הִרְהִרוּ אַחֵר מִדּוֹתַי,
וְאַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ לָמָּה הִרְעַנְתָּהּ?

Our rabbis expounded this section as referencing what *precedes* it—what Moses said (5:22), “Why have You brought harm to this people?”

G-d told him, “Alas, for those who are gone [i.e., the patriarchs] and are no longer! I have reason to grieve the death of the patriarchs. Many a time did I reveal Myself to them by the name *Kel Shakai*, and not once did they ask Me, ‘What is Your name?’ But you said (Exodus 3:13): [If they ask] ‘what is His name,’ what shall I say to them?”!

“Also I set up, etc.” And yet when Abraham wished to bury Sarah, he could not obtain a grave until he purchased one at a high price. So, too, in the case of Isaac, people fought with him for possession of the wells that he had dug. Similarly, of Jacob it is stated (Genesis 33:19), “He *purchased* a parcel of field” in which to pitch his tent. Yet none of them criticized My dealings with them, while you say, “Why have You brought harm to this people?”

Questions

TEXT 5

RASHI, IBID.

וַאִין הַמִּדְרָשׁ מִתִּישָׁב אַחַר הַמִּקְרָא מִפְּנֵי כַּמָּה דְבָרִים.
 אַחַת, שֶׁלֹּא נֶאֱמַר וַשְּׁמִי ה' לֹא שָׁאֲלוּ לִי . . .
 וְעוֹד הֵיאֵךְ הַסְּמִיכָה נִמְשַׁכֶּת בְּדְבָרִים שֶׁהוּא סוֹמֵךְ לְכָאן וְגַם אֲנִי
 שִׁמְעֵתִי וְגו' לָכֵן אֶמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל?
 לָכֵן אֲנִי אֹמֵר יִתְיָשֵׁב הַמִּקְרָא עַל פְּשׁוּטוֹ, דְּבוּר דְּבוּר עַל אֶפְנָיו.
 וְהַדְרָשָׁה תִּדְרָשׁ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "הֲלוֹא כֹה דִּבְרֵי כָּאֵשׁ נָאֵם ה' וּכְפִטִישׁ יְפוּצָץ
 סֵלַע" - מִתְחַלֵּק לְכַמָּה נִיצוּצוֹת.

However, this Midrashic exposition does not fit in with the text for several reasons.

First, because the verse does not state, “And they did not *ask* of Me regarding My name, *Havayah*. . . .”

Moreover, how does this interpretation fit within the context of the following verses, “And also I have heard. . . . *Therefore*, say to the Israelite people, etc.”?

Therefore, I say: Let the verse be explained according to its literal sense so that each statement fits into its proper setting. And let the Midrashic exposition be expounded, as it is stated, “My words are like fire, says G-d, and like a hammer shatters a rock” (Jeremiah 23:29)—into many sparks.

II. STONES, SPARKS, AND MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS

TEXT 6

TALMUD, SHABBAT 88B

תַּנִּי דְבֵי רַבִּי יִשְׁמַעֵאל: "וְכַפֵּיטִישׁ יְפַצֵּץ סֶלַע", מֵה פֶּטִישׁ זֶה נִחַלֵּק
לְכַמָּה נִיצוּצוֹת.

The school of Rabbi Yishma'el taught “like a hammer shatters a rock” (Jeremiah 23:29): Just as this hammer breaks a stone into several fragments.

Babylonian Talmud

A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish sages from the period after the destruction of the second Temple through the 5th century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.

III. EXPLANATION: ONE METAPHOR VS. TWO METAPHORS

A Second Conversation

TEXT 7A

EXODUS 6:2

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה'.

And G-d spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am G-d.”

TEXT 7B

RASHI, AD LOC.

“וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה.” דַּבֵּר אֶתּוֹ מְשַׁפֵּט, עַל שֶׁהִקְשָׁה לְדַבֵּר וְלוֹמַר
“לָמָּה הִרְעַנְתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה.”

“And G-d spoke to Moses.” He spoke harshly with him because he had spoken so brazenly when he said, (Exodus 5:22) “Why have you brought harm to this people?”

IV. QUESTIONS ARE WINDOWS TO EXPLORATION

I Do Not Know

TEXT 8

RASHI, GENESIS 28:5

”אִם יַעֲקֹב יַעֲשֶׂוּ. אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ מַה מְלַמְּדֵנּוּ.”

“Mother of Jacob and Esau.” I do not know what the addition of these words is intended to tell us.

TEXT 9

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *SICHOT KODESH* 5741:2, P. 88

איז דער ביאור בזה: רש"י מיינט דערמיט אז "לא ידעתי" דעם פירוש אין פסוק על דרך הפשט, וואס דאס איז זיין דרך הלימוד על התורה. אבער על דרך הדרוש וכו', ווייס איך א פירוש. נאר ווייל דאס איז ניט דרך לימודו בפירושו – איז עס "לא ידעתי".

The explanation: When Rashi says he doesn't know, he means, "I don't know how to explain this in the plain meaning," which is Rashi's methodology—explaining the text according to its plain meaning. However, on another layer of understanding, such as homiletically, "I do know an explanation." Since it is outside of his preferred methodology, he says he doesn't know.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson 1902–1994

The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as "the Lubavitcher Rebbe," or simply as "the Rebbe." Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe's scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.

“You’ll Understand When You Get Older”

TEXT 10

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, IBID.

און ווי דאס איז מודגש אויך אין דעם וואס מלמדים זיינען רגיל זאגן צו זייערע תלמידים. מיין מלמדים פלעגט דאס זאגן, און מסתמא איז אזוי אויך געווען בא אנדערע, און מסתמא אויך בא די קינדער וואס געפינען דײך דא אין און ווילן משיח "נאו" – אז זייערע מלמדים זאגן צו זיי, אדער וועלן צו זיי זאגן מארגן: ווען דו וועסט עלעטר ווערן וועסטו פארשטיין.

וואס אויך אין דערויף לייגט דער תוכן פון "לא ידעתי" אין פירוש רש"י. און די מיינונג דערביי איז: דו זאלסט ניט מיינען וויבאלד מ'פארשטייט ניט איצטער איז דאס א זאך וואס מ'וועט שוין קיינמאל ניט פארשטיין. ניין! בשעת מ'וועט עלטער ווערן וועט מען זען אז ס'איז דא א פירוש על דרך הרמז על דרך הדרוש על דרך הסוד וכו', און דעמולט וועט מען עס פארשטיין.

We see this approach in practice when teachers tell their students, “When you get older, you’ll understand.” My teacher would say this, and it’s probably the case with others, and probably even with the children who are here now, and want Mashiach now. Their teachers surely tell them, or will tell them, the same thing.

This is similar to Rashi saying, “I do not know.” What he means is this: Don’t think just because you don’t understand something now, you’ll never be able to understand it. No! This is not true. When you grow older, you’ll learn about allegorical meaning, homiletical meaning, mystical meaning, etc.—and then you’ll understand.

TEXT 11

RABBI AKIVA WAGNER, "AND NONETHELESS . . . IT HAPPENED" WWW.CHABAD.ORG/779714

What's going on? How can that be? How is that possible? . . .

The answer is: we don't know! We don't know the answer. . . . It can't be! It's impossible! The Talmud says it can't be. . . . *Impossible!*

But . . . *af al pi ken* . . . nonetheless . . . It happened. The questions are all there, but that's how it is. We get another lesson in the limitation of our intellect. We have calculations, logical ones, Torah-based ones, that we are certain about and we have a license to be. We know certain things can't happen.

You're right, says the Talmud. But . . . *af al pi ken* . . . nonetheless . . . it happened. We cry out in unmanageable pain, in frustration, in anger, and in shocked disbelief. But then we bow our heads in humility, and we accept. We move forward. Because one of the basic foundations of our religion is the conviction that G-d is infinite, and it would be arrogant and foolish for us to even dream of understanding Him. And from time to time things continue to happen that don't make sense in our book, that don't even seem to make sense in His book, and . . . nonetheless . . . they happen. And we can only turn our tearful eyes heavenwards, and ask: "It happened, we accepted; isn't it time to let us understand? Isn't it time for the era when, as Isaiah says, we will 'thank You for having [been] wrathful with us?'"

A Single Organism with Multiple Parts

TEXT 12

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 21, PP. 36-37

נאר נאך מער: אויך ווי יעדער חלק פון תורה איז אין זיין באשטימטן "ארט", און דער לימוד פון דעם חלק אין תורה איז דוקא לויט די כללי הלימוד המתאימים לחלק זה – ווארום יעדער חלק אין תורה האט זיינע כללי הלימוד. איז מצד דעם וואס עס איז א טייל פון תורת ה' וואס איז "דברי כאש" – למעלה מהתחלקות (ווי די פשיטות פון אש) – בלייבט עס (במהותו ובאמתתו) איין זאך מיט כל שאר חלקי התורה, ביז אז אן ענין וואס איז מוכרח אין פשוטו של מקרא קען אריינגעשטעלט ווערן אין חלק הדרש.

The unity of Torah is such that even though each area of Torah has its distinct place and operates within its own set of rules, it remains intrinsically connected to the whole. As part of G-d's Torah, which is likened to "fire"—an entity that transcends distinction and embodies the attribute of indivisibility—every aspect of Torah is interconnected in its entirety. This unity is so profound that insights essential for understanding the plain meaning (*peshat*) can be found within the homiletical dimension (*derash*) of Torah.

KEY POINTS

- » Rashi offers two interpretations for G-d's words to Moshe at the start of the *parshah*: one grounded in the plain meaning (*peshat*) and the other Agadic (homiletic).
- » Rashi rejects the Midrashic interpretation for *peshat* purposes, but supports its necessity through a metaphor of a stone splitting and sparks from fire.
- » By deviating from the Talmudic, Rashi emphasizes the precise nature and function of the dual interpretations: each one remains in its genre, yet they are both critical to understanding the text.
- » Rashi's willingness to admit "I don't know" when facing unresolved questions highlights intellectual humility and encourages deeper exploration of Torah.
- » Questions should be embraced as an integral part of learning and spiritual development, with the understanding that not every answer is immediate or simple.

